

*Thanks  
Disk Jockeys  
for launching  
our Hits -  
Leonard and  
Phil Chess*

Advertisement from *The Billboard*:  
March 24, 1958.

**CHESS PRODUCING CORP.**  
2120 S. Michigan Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois  
CALumet 8-2770

CHESS RECORDS OFFICE AND STUDIO  
2120 South Michigan Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois

Erected: 1911

Architect: Horatio R. Wilson

Remodeled for Chess: 1956-57

Architect for remodeling: John S. Townsend Jr.

On any given day, tourists from around the world can be found peering into a small two-story building on South Michigan Avenue, or having their photographs taken by the doorway labeled simply by the address "2120". With its unassuming terra-cotta facade and 1950s aluminum storefront, the building seems like an unlikely candidate for international veneration, but as the offices and studio of the Chess Record Corporation between 1957 and 1967, the building has come to be regarded as one of the legendary historical sites of twentieth century recorded music. Within its walls were produced some of the most influential recordings in the creative development of the genres of the blues and rock 'n' roll, as well as significant recordings in other musical disciplines. Two decades have passed since Chess occupied the 2120 South Michigan Avenue building, but the recordings that originated there are still played internationally and continue to influence the ongoing evolution of popular music.

The musicians and management of Chess Records were rough hewn out of the streets of Chicago, giving the company a creative identity that set it apart from contemporary record labels. Its origins go back to founders Leonard and Phil Chess, sons of an immigrant family, who established themselves in the operation of nightclubs on Chicago's South Side in the 1940s. Catering primarily to a black clientele, the Chess brothers recognized the commercial potential of the local jazz and blues musicians who performed in their clubs, and sought to capture the intensity of these performances on records. Although they initially knew little about the specifics of the music they were recording, the Chess brothers relied on instinct, hunches, and a gut emotional response to what they heard. Their inexperience in music and the record business worked to their advantage, as they had no preconceived notions about what was considered appropriate and saleable to the commercial recording industry, allowing them to release records that stood out from contemporary record labels.

While the Chess brothers set up the creative incubator, it was the music and musicians that were the lifeblood of the Chess organization. Of the many types of recordings produced by Chess, the label is best known for its seminal recordings in the blues and rock 'n' roll. From their earliest efforts in the record business, the Chess brothers recorded the rugged, emotionally charged "Delta" or "country" blues, as performed by southern black musicians, many of whom came to Chicago from the villages and towns of the Mississippi Delta. In these

recordings, the powerful acoustic rhythms of the Delta bluesmen merged with the urban influence of electrified instruments and a pronounced drumbeat to evolve into what came to be known as the distinctive "Chicago Blues" sound. Once captured and replicated on a mass scale by Chess, the Chicago sound was liberated from its regional limits. The "Chicago Blues" as nurtured by Chess proved to be popular with diverse audiences in the United States and Europe, and gave international exposure to such artists as Muddy Waters, Willie Dixon, Howlin' Wolf, and Sonny Boy Williamson. In turn, the electrified big beat sound provided one of the major sources of creative inspiration for the rock 'n' roll movement of the 1950s, which was largely shaped by Chess recordings of artists like Chuck Berry and Bo Diddley.

Even after Chess achieved nationwide commercial success, it remained a small, streetwise family business for most of its existence. While the major record labels maintained huge multi-million dollar plants with hundreds of employees and sophisticated marketing strategies, Chess remained among its roots on Chicago's South Side, operating out of a series of small storefronts with only a handful of employees. Despite the small size of its staff and facilities, Chess was able to actively compete with the larger companies, amassing a considerable roster of hit records on the national charts. Chess was not the only small independent label to achieve success in the 1950s and 1960s, nor was it the only label to have an impact on the blues and rock 'n' roll, but the creativity of its management and recording artists gave the company an unquestionably elevated status among contemporary record labels and earned the firm a significant niche in the history of recorded music.

#### BIG NOISE FROM THE CHESS BOYS

The backgrounds of Chess Records founders Leonard Chess (1917-1969) and his younger brother Phil give little indication of their later vocation in the music business. The sons of a Polish-Jewish immigrant family, the Chess brothers were brought to Chicago in 1928, where they lived on the West Side and were educated in the public schools. Upon reaching working age, the Chess brothers were employed in various non-music related jobs, including working with their father in the Chess & Sons Junk Shop at 2979 South State Street.

Leonard Chess found more lucrative opportunities in the liquor distribution business, which led him to specialize in the operation of taverns and nightclubs catering to a primarily black clientele on Chicago's South Side. The largest of these was the Macomba Lounge which he opened with Phil in 1946 at 3905 South Drexel Boulevard. Leonard Chess' son Marshall later recalled the Macomba Lounge as being a "rough place", but its live entertainment included such notable performers as Billy Eckstein, Gene Ammons, Ella Fitzgerald, and Jump Jackson. The Macomba Lounge was also a favorite gathering place of visiting musicians who would come in and jam with the house band in the late hours. The spontaneous atmosphere of the nightclub performances gave the Chess

brothers much of their orientation into the music business, an atmosphere that they later tried to capture in their recordings.

#### ARISTOCRAT RECORDS - THE EARLY YEARS

The destiny of the Chess brothers changed in 1947 when Leonard Chess observed a Hollywood record scout talking to the Macomba lead band singer Andrew Tibbs. In an interview in the Chicago Tribune published on May 11, 1969, Leonard Chess recalled how this incident gave birth to his career in the record business:

Tibbs told me they wanted him to cut a record, and so I thought that if he's good enough for Hollywood, I'll put him on record myself. We bought some time at Universal (recording studios) which was then in the Civic Opera building, and put out a record of "Union Man Blues" with a tune called "Bilbo's Dead" on the other side. Tibbs had the lyrics written on a brown shopping bag.

Operating out of a small storefront office at 2300 East 71st Street, Leonard Chess began arranging recording sessions for other musicians, many of whom had previously performed at the Chess-owned nightclubs. Beginning in 1947, these sessions were released on 78 rpm records, under the name of "Aristocrat Records", the label being owned by a partnership consisting of Leonard Chess, Phil Chess, and Evelyn Aron, a investor who also assisted in the management of the office. The operations of the Aristocrat label were largely managerial, as the firm had no recording or manufacturing facilities of its own. Creative direction of the label was largely managed by Leonard Chess, who arranged for the musicians to record at commercial recording studios and had the sessions manufactured into records.

The early releases of the Aristocrat label included some mainstream dance band and polka music, but the majority of its releases were jazz and blues, drawing on Chess' personal experience in the South Side nightclub business. Intended primarily for sale to black audiences, most of the Aristocrat issues were what was known in the record business as "race" or "specialty" recordings, a practice of producing records for specific ethnic markets. Beginning in the 1920s many of the major recording companies such as RCA Victor, Columbia, Okeh, and Brunswick produced special record catalogues targeted for blacks and foreign language specialty markets, but began to eliminate these lines by the 1940s. Chess' Aristocrat label was one of countless small independent labels that sprang up in the late 1940s to fill the void in the specialty market left by the large companies.

Leonard Chess initially left the local distribution of Aristocrat Records to a record broker, but his experience with South Side entertainment markets led him to take over the distribution himself. With records loaded in the trunk of his car, Chess made the rounds of various record and variety stores, barber shops, beauty salons, and other businesses in the black community, making contacts and setting up

new sales outlets for his records. In addition, Chess also acted as distributor for other small independent labels, operating a sales outlet out of the Aristocrat office, which moved to a new storefront location at 5249 S. Cottage Grove in 1948. Chess also traveled to make business contacts and establish sales outlets in Detroit and other Midwestern cities, as well as in the South. On these trips, Chess also looked for new talent, carrying a wire recorder in his car to record potential new recording artists. In an interview in 1969, Leonard Chess recalled the problems he had in gaining experience in his new vocation:

I didn't know what I was doing, but I was doing it all myself, working days on the record company and nights at the club. Pretty soon I had to get out of the club and I turned it over to Phil. But then I was on the road so much, three weeks at a time, running up to Detroit and down south because I had to make all the deliveries right to the record stores myself, that I finally told Phil to sell the club and come run the office while I was on the road.

By January 1950, Phil Chess had joined his brother full time in managing the business operations of Aristocrat, replacing Evelyn Aron who had withdrawn from the firm to establish her own distributing company. A major change in the image of the company was the renaming of the label to "Chess Records", following a suggestion made to Leonard Chess by a Memphis record presser. The first release on the new label was a jazz instrumental by Gene Ammons titled "My Foolish Heart," released in June 1950. The session was an impromptu jam performance by Ammons and his sidemen after a regular session, but Chess kept the recording machine running, and ultimately chose "My Foolish Heart" as the inaugural release on the new Chess label. Numbered "1425" after the Chess brothers' childhood apartment at 1425 South Karlov Avenue, "My Foolish Heart" proved to be a great success, leading Leonard Chess to recall in 1969: "That was when Chess was really born."

#### HOTTEST LITTLE LABEL IN THE COUNTRY

The catalogue of the new Chess label built on the previous success that the Aristocrat label had enjoyed in the production of recordings initially intended for black audiences, a majority of its releases being in the genres of jazz, blues, and gospel. While Chess produced many significant jazz and gospel recordings its innovative blues recordings launched its miraculous elevation from a small company producing specialty records to an internationally regarded leader in the recording industry.

From the earliest Aristocrat sessions in 1947, the Chess brothers made their label a creative forum for the the rugged, emotional sound of the "Delta" or "country" blues, which had its origins in the distinctive style of musicians from the Mississippi Delta. Previously, the styling of the Delta blues was largely regional in popularity, focused mainly

in the southern Mississippi Delta area and in the Midwest where large numbers of former Delta residents had relocated in the decades following World War I. Most of the large record companies that released specialty records found the rugged blues style of the Delta musicians to be too locally oriented to be commercially successful in nationwide markets, and in instances where Delta artists were recorded by the major companies, much of the rugged, emotional character of the music was toned down to appeal to a broader audience.

Since Chess initially depended largely on Midwest and Delta area southern markets for its success, the label freely recorded the work of the Delta blues artists. Mississippi-born musician and composer Willie Dixon, who was employed by Chess in the early 1950s to coordinate their recordings, later recalled that the Chess brothers "never knew anything about the musical angle of things" and that they "couldn't tell one kind of blues from another when they first started". While the Chess brothers were not familiar with the form and genre of the music they were recording, their experience in the nightclub business gave them an appreciation for the intensity of Delta blues performers, and they actively encouraged the emotional spontaneity that other record labels tried to discourage. In actuality, the intensity of the Delta blues artists increased rather than diminished with the introduction of the urban influences that brought a greater use of electrified instruments and a pronounced drumbeat, evolving a distinctive style in itself, often referred to as the "Chicago Blues" sound.

The best known and most influential of the Chess blues artists was Muddy Waters (1915-1983), a native of Rolling Fork, Sharkey County, Mississippi, who originally recorded for the Chess brothers in 1947, accompanying Sunnyland Slim on recordings made for the Aristocrat label. With his powerful vocal stylings and rhythmic guitar, the intensity of Waters' music initially sounded too rugged for Leonard Chess, who reportedly complained "What's he singing? I can't understand what he's singing." With the urging of Chess' associate Evelyn Aron, Waters was showcased in recordings of his own which enjoyed great commercial success and established him as the premier Chess blues artist during the entire existence of the label.

Chess soon amassed an impressive roster of blues artists, which included Howlin' Wolf, Sonny Boy Williamson, Little Walter, Willie Mabon, J.B. Lenoir, and other significant performers. Of especial importance was Willie Dixon, the multitalented bassist, composer, and producer whose employment by the Chess brothers had a major impact on the creative direction of the Chess label. From the early 1950s, Dixon helped select and develop the talent recorded by Chess and often participated as a songwriter, arranger and performer in the recording sessions. Under Dixon's influence, Chess became a laboratory for the development of the blues medium, experimenting with variations in the traditional twelve-bar blues form and expanding the range of the Chicago blues sound.

With improved management and distribution, Chess broke out of its limited regional audience and began to attract attention in national rhythm and blues record charts. The electrified "big beat" sound of the Chess releases stood out from contemporary rhythm and blues recordings, and soon gained considerable radio airplay, achieving a popularity that crossed ethnic lines. The popularity of their recordings prompted the Chess Brothers to establish Checker Records in 1952, a subsidiary label which specialized in blues recordings. In 1954, ten records produced by Chess achieved ratings on the national hit charts in the rhythm and blues category. Despite its success, Chess remained a modestly run business, operating out of an ordinary storefront with four employees at the northwest corner of 49th Street and Cottage Grove Avenue between 1951 and 1954, and a double storefront at 4750-52 South Cottage Grove Avenue between 1954 and 1957.

The distinctive Chess sound began to subtly work its way into fabric of popular music of the time and was an important element in the evolution of what came to be known as "rock 'n' roll". Seeking more diversified markets, Chess experimented with recordings that were related to country and western music, yet were infused with strong blues-derived characteristics. Released under the Chess labels, many of these recordings were made by Memphis producer and talent scout Sam Phillips, whose own label, Sun Records, was also to have a major impact on rock 'n' roll with recordings of artists such as Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, and Jerry Lee Lewis. While Chess achieved modest success with these recordings, the label was to provide the greatest stimulus towards the development of rock 'n' roll through recordings by two artists of its own discovery, Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry. Building upon the foundations laid by the blues artists who preceded them, both Diddley and Berry began at Chess as virtual unknowns and emerged as two of the most significant recording artists defining the evolving sound of rock 'n' roll.

In the early 1950s, Bo Diddley had a varied career in Chicago performing in nightclubs, and as a street performer. In a 1986 interview, Willie Dixon recalled his first contact with Diddley:

I saw him jamming in the streets along 43rd and 47th. He was just jamming and passing the hat. So we told him to come over to Chess. After we listened to him two or three times, we decided to record. He did "I'm a Man" and it took off.

From his earliest recordings for Chess in 1955, Diddley's fast paced "Diddliesh" beat proved to be an overwhelming commercial success, particularly with teen-age audiences. Similarly successful were the recordings of Chuck Berry, a native of St. Louis whose initial 1955 Chess recording "Mabelline" quickly gained popularity in the national charts. Largely writing his own material, Berry's music embraced subjects relevant to teen-aged America, making him one of the most popular figures in the rock 'n' roll movement of the 1950s.



## SWEET HOME CHICAGO: 2120 SOUTH MICHIGAN AVENUE

By the mid-1950s, the commercial success of the records produced by Chess put the company in direct "top ten" competition with the giant firms of the mainstream recording industry, and forced the firm to seek larger and more sophisticated quarters for its operations. Late in 1956, Chess purchased the narrow two-story building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue, and hired architect John S. Townsend Jr. to design alterations to convert it into offices, shipping facilities, and a first-class recording studio. At the time of the purchase, the surrounding neighborhood was built up with similar small light industrial lofts, many of which were occupied by record industry-related businesses, a factor that may have influenced Chess to locate there.

The building itself was originally erected in 1911 as commercial investment property by Chicago real estate broker Matson Hill, and was designed by architect Horatio Wilson (1857-1917) whose practice encompassed a wide variety of commercial and residential projects in the city. A narrow party-wall building, the 25-foot frontage on Michigan Avenue was clad in an elaborately detailed facing of architectural terra cotta with a large storefront at the first floor. Interiors were unsubdivided loft space and were intended for occupancy by small, semi-industrial businesses. Over the years, the building had been occupied by varied commercial tenants and was rented prior to its purchase by Chess to a furniture slipcover manufacturer, and a firm dealing in neckties.

To give the building an up-to-date appearance consistent with Chess' standing in the record industry, \$20,000 was spent to cosmetically update the building to 1950s standards, and adapt it to the diverse operations of the Chess Corporation. To update its street appearance, the first floor storefront of the building was taken out and replaced with a new recessed aluminum storefront, framed by dark granite slabs cladding the surrounding masonry. On the interior, set back behind the show-windows, was a bank of ornamental glass and redwood display shelves upon which the latest Chess records were displayed. The first floor was planned for the executive offices of the firm, the corridors having wood and glass partitions, and the offices themselves finished in redwood paneling and plaster. At the rear of the first floor was a large shipping room that was accessible to the rear alley loading door. The second floor was planned for the recording facilities, incorporating a large recording studio and rehearsal room. Although not indicated on the original plans, the rear of the second floor was adapted as a concrete-lined vault for the storage of recording masters. Another alteration not shown on the plans but executed soon after Chess moved in was the boarding over of the second floor windows on the street front, protecting the control room and master-cutting lathe from street noise.

The Chess Recording Corporation moved to 2120 South Michigan Avenue in May 1957 and continued to use the building as their headquarters for the next ten years. After operating its record business out of rented

storefronts for two decades, the 2120 building represented the first location owned by Chess and its first self-contained facilities for administrative, distribution, and recording purposes. The building not only served the production of records under the Chess label but also its subsidiary labels Checker (established in 1952), Argo (established in 1955), and Cadet (established in 1965).

Transplanted into its modernized redwood-paneled offices, the Chess Corporation was given a sleek up-to-date appearance, but its management retained the same informal streetwise savvy upon which its success was originally built. Leonard and Phil Chess continued to rely on their hunches and instincts, honed in their ten years in the recording business. To handle the increased size of the business, the Chess payroll swelled to approximately fifteen people, still an extremely modest number for a company of its stature. To keep up with the ever-changing trends in the recording industry, the Chess brothers brought in a number of talented people to guide the operations of the company. One of the most influential figures in the management of Chess' Michigan Avenue operations was Ralph Bass, hired in 1958 as the firm's "A & R" (artist and repertoire) director. Like the Chess brothers, Bass had learned the recorded music business through direct street experience, having previously worked as a talent scout and producer, making the rounds of small nightclubs and taverns to discover new talent. Also like the Chess brothers, Bass knew the value of the spontaneity of live nightclub performances, and tried to recreate an informal nightclub atmosphere in the Chess' second-floor studio.

One of the most significant aspects of the 2120 South Michigan Avenue building is that it was equipped with its own recording studio, allowing all Chess recordings to be made in-house. Previously, most Chess recordings were made in outside commercial studios, limiting the opportunity for beginning-to-end supervision of the firm's creative output. A small makeshift studio furnished with second-hand equipment was installed at the rear of Chess' office at 4750-52 South Cottage Grove Avenue in 1954, but its poor quality forced the company to continue to use outside studios for much of its recording needs. In remodeling 2120 South Michigan Avenue, a large, well-equipped studio was constructed that was initially managed by a separate subsidiary, the Sheldon Recording Studio Incorporated, but was taken over by Chess in 1958. Upon taking control of the studio, Chess secured the services of Malcolm Chisholm, a master recording engineer who had previously worked for Universal Recording Studios, the firm which previously had done much of Chess' recording work. The following year, Chisholm left for California and was replaced by Ron Malo, another talented recording engineer whose work significantly contributed to the distinctive sound of Chess records. Among Malo's contributions to the studio was the construction of dual echo chambers in the basement which were used for special effects.

The second-floor studio became the great musical laboratory for the talents of the Chess recording artists, whose works were sharpened and enhanced through the creative input of the Chess management and

technical staff. For typical sessions, Ralph Bass would sit in the recording studio with the artists to encourage the same kind of informal atmosphere characteristic of a nightclub, while recording engineers Chisholm or Malo brought out the best of the sessions through their technical expertise. Ralph Bass recalled in a 1986 interview in the New City that "nothing was cut and dry. The fact is, in a session, a line might pop into your head all of a sudden. That's why we just let the tape player keep rolling". Except for a brief period when he worked for Cobra Records, Willie Dixon also remained as part of the creative force at 2120, especially in the writing, arranging, and producing of records by the label's roster of blues artists.

A listing of the artists who recorded at 2120 would encompass some of the greatest names in the blues, rock 'n' roll, and jazz. Most of the blues artists who had joined Chess in its early years continued to be a part of the its creative legacy at 2120 South Michigan Avenue, including Muddy Waters, Sonny Boy Williamson, J.B. Lenoir, Howlin' Wolf, and Little Walter. Newer artists such as Buddy Guy, Etta James, and Koko Taylor also enhanced the Chess blues roster and its role in the development and international recognition of the Chicago blues style. While the growing popularity of rock 'n' roll diminished the predominance of the blues as the principal asset of the Chess catalogue, the firm continued its commitment to the production of quality blues recordings.

Rock 'n' roll became a staple of the Chess catalogue during the years the firm occupied 2120 South Michigan Avenue. Chuck Berry recorded four of his seven top-ten singles at the building, including "Johnny B. Goode" and "Rock 'n' Roll Music," and is reputed to have maintained a small office in the basement of the building. Bo Diddley continued to be one of the most popular Chess recording artists and recorded a considerable volume of work at 2120 South Michigan Avenue, including his 1959 hit "Say Man" which was released on the Checker subsidiary. Chess also achieved success with the work of other rock and pop-related artists and groups, including the Moonglows, the Vibrations, the Dells, Jimmy McCracklin, and countless others who were mainstays of the popular music field in the 1950s and 1960s.

While Chess is widely known for its recordings in the blues and rock 'n' roll, the firm produced recordings in a range of other subjects. From its earliest years of operation, Chess maintained a significant catalogue of jazz material, and recorded performers such as Ramsey Lewis, Ahmad Jamal, and Sonny Stitt. While Chess was achieving success with top-ten national markets, it also continued to produce specialty recordings intended primarily for black audiences, recalling the label's origins in the 1940s and 1950s. These included a variety of musical and spoken word subjects, ranging from rhythm and blues to sermons by Detroit minister the Reverend C.L. Franklin, whose daughter Aretha was later to achieve success as a popular recording artist. In the 1960s Chess also experimented with comedy albums and was instrumental in bringing the talents of Moms Mabley and Pigmeat Markham to a wider audience.

## RECORDS ACROSS THE SEA

Beginning in the 1950s, blues and rock 'n' roll recordings by Chess were eagerly received and studied by younger musicians who synthesized the essence of the distinctive Chess sound in their own contributions to the development of rock 'n' roll in the following decades. The appeal of the Chess recordings went well beyond the United States, and were actively sought by diverse European audiences as well. In England, musicians scoured the import bins of the record stores in search of records by Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Chuck Berry, and the other Chess recording artists, providing much of the creative inspiration for the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, Eric Clapton, and other British musicians and groups that were thrust into prominence in the 1960s.

Of the groups of the "British Invasion" of the 1960s, perhaps none owed a greater debt to the influence of Chess recordings than the Rolling Stones, whose principals, Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, reportedly met in a London record store while searching for Chess recordings. In forming their now-famous band, the group took their name from Muddy Water's 1950 recording "Rolling Stone" which was one of the first releases on the Chess label. As an homage to the heritage of the recordings that were made at Chess, and with a desire to impart the distinctive Chess sound to their work, the Rolling Stones came to Chicago in 1964 to record material at 2120 South Michigan Avenue for their "12 x 5" album. As a part of the session, the group recorded an instrumental titled "2120 South Michigan Avenue" as a tribute to Chess and the important music recorded at that address.

## THE END OF AN ERA

With the attention given by the Rolling Stones, and the increasing awareness of the significance of the recordings produced by Chess, the building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue became something of a legend, even during the years the company occupied it. As the building achieved increased notoriety in the mid-1960s, plans were being formulated which eventually would lead to its abandonment by Chess. To keep pace with the growth of the company, Chess purchased a large eight-story factory building at 320 East 21st Street in 1966, which was remodeled as a new, larger headquarters to replace the 2120 building. In the process of moving to the new building between late 1966 and early 1967, Chess maintained a skeleton staff and scheduled limited recording sessions at 2120, but eventually abandoned all active operations in the building in favor of the new location.

Relocated in the new building, Chess began to diverge from its course of being a small, informally run company and sought to expand its operations into a self-sufficient music "factory". The diversity of its operations was described in the Chicago Tribune on May 11, 1969:

In the Chess building musicians are hired (and sometimes managed); songs are written, arranged, published, and recorded on eight-track stereo tapes, "mixed" to balance or augment the sounds of studio performances, transferred to vinyl master discs and then to nickel-plated stamping discs from which, still in the same building, phonograph records are mass produced, jacketed, packed in shipping cartons, and sent out to distributors nationwide and in Europe. Chess designs and prints its own record labels, even punching the little round hole in the center.

Boasting that the firm could "get a record on the market, from performance to record shop, in 24 hours," Chess entered the complexities of the large-scale corporate record business, leaving behind much of the streetwise informality that had characterized the operations at 2120 South Michigan Avenue. While many of the key management and recording artists remained at the new location, the increased size somewhat diluted the impulsive creative spirit of the company and its recordings. Chess was obliged to keep up with the frenzied, high-stakes pace of the commercial record industry by putting a greater emphasis on popular music. The firm continued to record the Chicago blues sound that had originally built the label over a quarter century before, but with variations in arrangements and instrumentation to make the music more compatible with the rock music markets of the time.

Plagued by ill health, Leonard Chess gradually withdrew from the day to day operations of the label and together with his brother Phil began to concentrate on the ownership and operation of radio stations, starting with their establishment of Chicago radio station WVON in 1963. By the late 1960s, Leonard Chess felt that he was "over the hill" in gauging the tastes of popular music for the record business and turned over more and more responsibility to his son Marshall who sought to "restore the reputation we used to have as innovators." The legacy of Chess as a family-run business came to an end in January 1969 when its operations were sold to a California firm, General Recorded Tape Incorporated, although the new owners retained the services of both Chess brothers and Marshall Chess in managerial positions. Another major blow to the family orientation of the business came with the death of Leonard Chess, who suffered a fatal heart attack on October 16, 1969. By the early 1970s, both Phil and Marshall Chess had left the business to pursue other interests, and the operations of the Chess label were eventually relocated to New York City. General Recorded Tape ceased operations in 1979, and the Chess catalogue was subsequently acquired by Sugar Hill Records, which sold it to MCA Records in 1986. While Chess is no longer an active label, MCA has reissued much of the treasure trove of music in the archives, making the distinctive Chess sound accessible for future generations.

While Chess ceased to exist as a business entity, the legacy of its music has transcended its tangible limitations. From early on, the firm's headquarters building at 2120 South Michigan Avenue came to be regarded as having legendary status, and a place of pilgrimage for international tourists. The building has not changed appreciably since

the time Chess occupied it. After Chess vacated the building in 1967, it remained inactive until 1969, when it was remodeled for use by the Sammy Dyer School of the Theater, a long-established South Side theater and dance school. While occupied by the Sammy Dyer School, the first floor was retained for office use, and the former studio spaces were converted for dance and theatrical use. In 1980, the building was acquired from the Chess family by former Chess musician Gerald Sims, who rents out the first floor to a private business and has re-equipped the second floor as a working recording studio, which retains the general form of the original spaces once occupied by the famous performers who recorded there.

Perhaps the greatest testament to Chess Records, the 2120 building, and the music recorded there came in 1977 when Chuck Berry's 1958 Chess recording "Johnny B. Goode" was included on a specially made metal disk launched into outer space with the Voyager I and II spacecrafts. The recording was among several chosen by a committee headed by Dr. Carl Sagan to represent the sounds of earth and civilization, should the spacecrafts be intercepted by intelligent beings during their long journey. From the small studio at 2120 South Michigan Avenue to the far reaches of outer space, it can be stated that the innovative products of Chess Records are an integral part of the heritage of Chicago, the nation, the world, and possibly the universe.

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### NEWSPAPERS:

Chicago Sun Times  
Chicago Tribune  
Chicago Daily News

### PERIODICALS:

The Billboard  
Living Blues  
Rolling Stone

*OPPOSITE:*

Originally erected in 1911, the Chess Corporation's 1957 alterations to the 2120 South Michigan Avenue building included a new granite and glass storefront, and the covering of the second-floor windows to soundproof the control room of the studio.

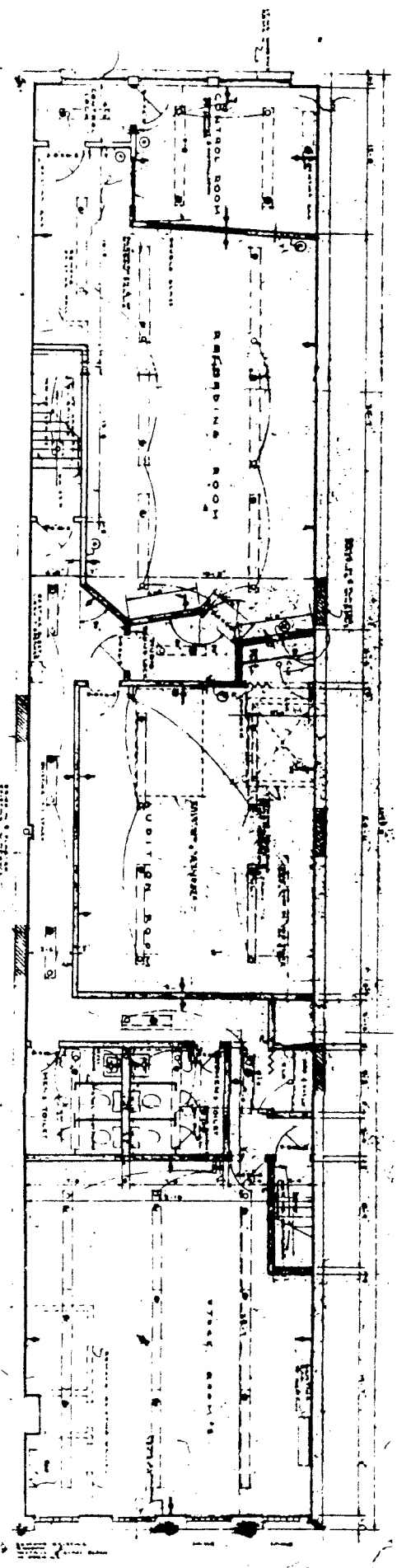




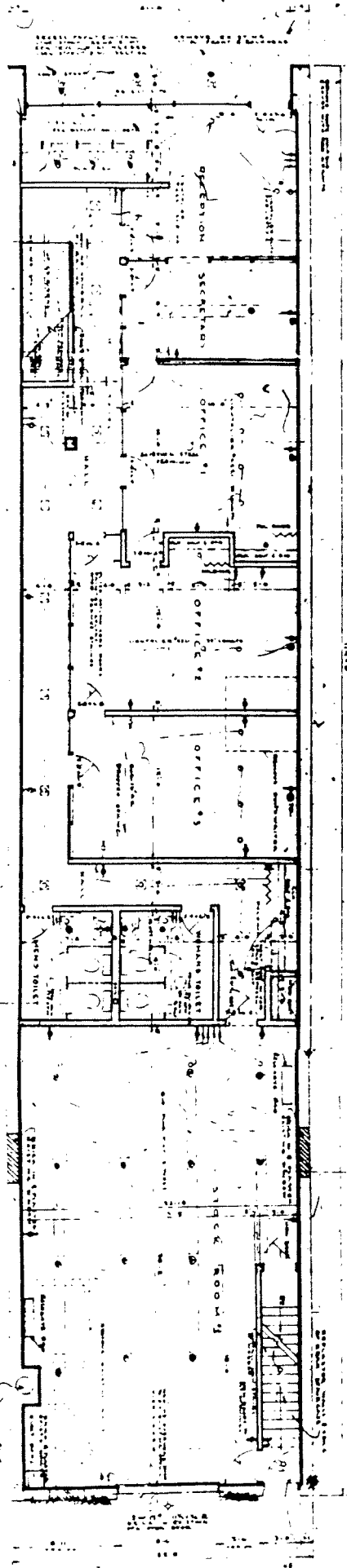
*OPPOSITE:*

Architect John S. Townsend Jr. prepared the 1957 plans for the conversion of the 2120 S. Michigan Avenue building into the office and studio of the Chess Corporation.

SECOND FLOOR PLAN

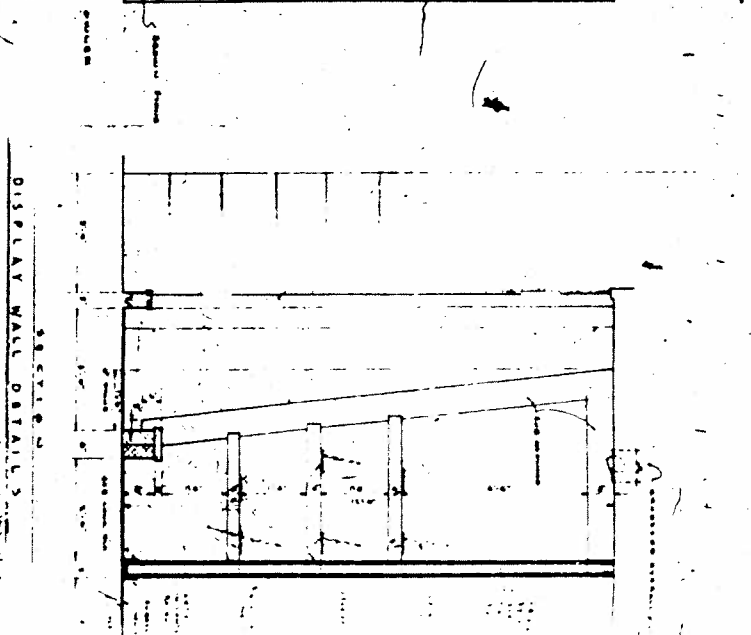
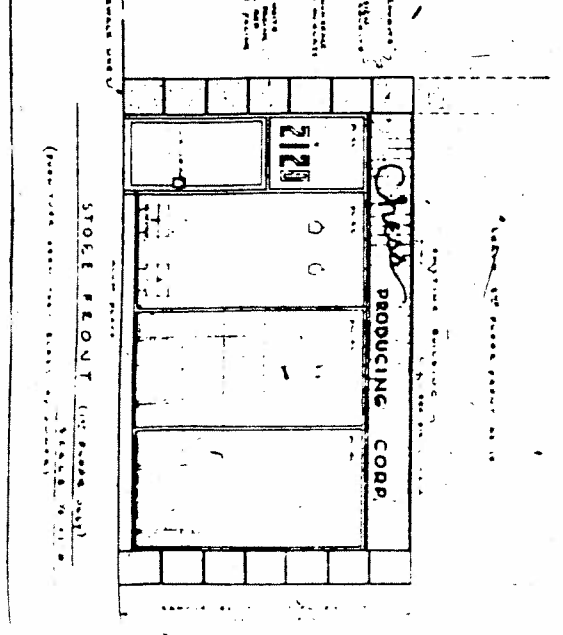
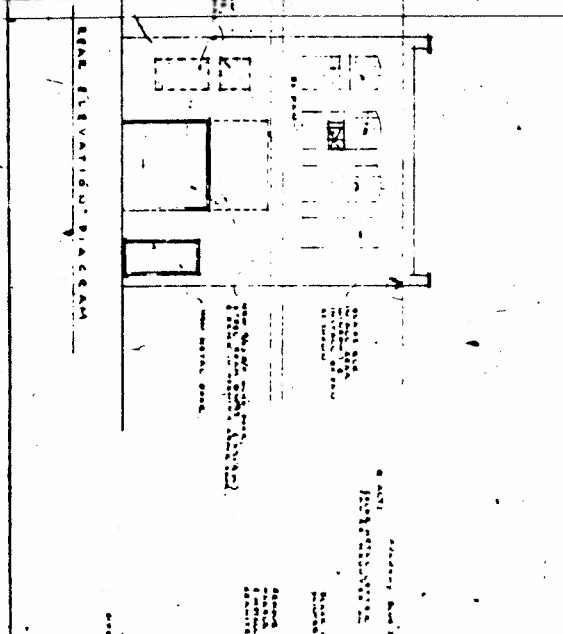
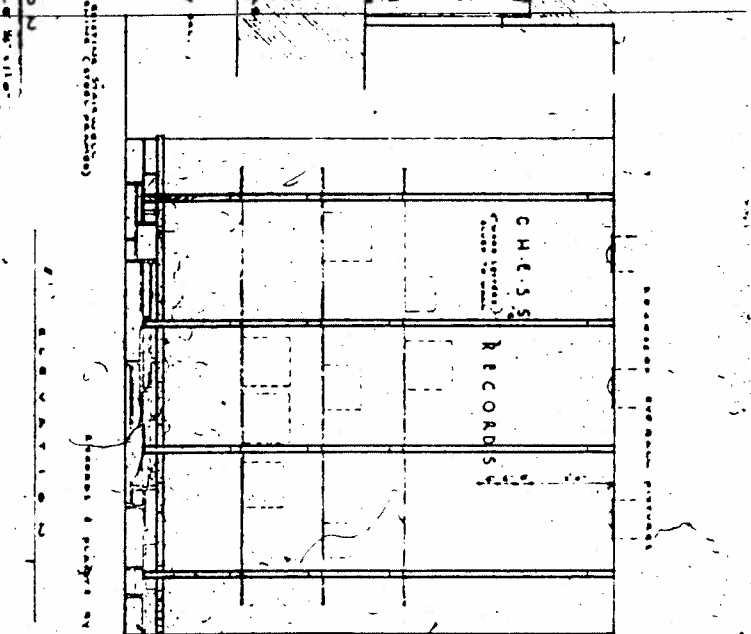
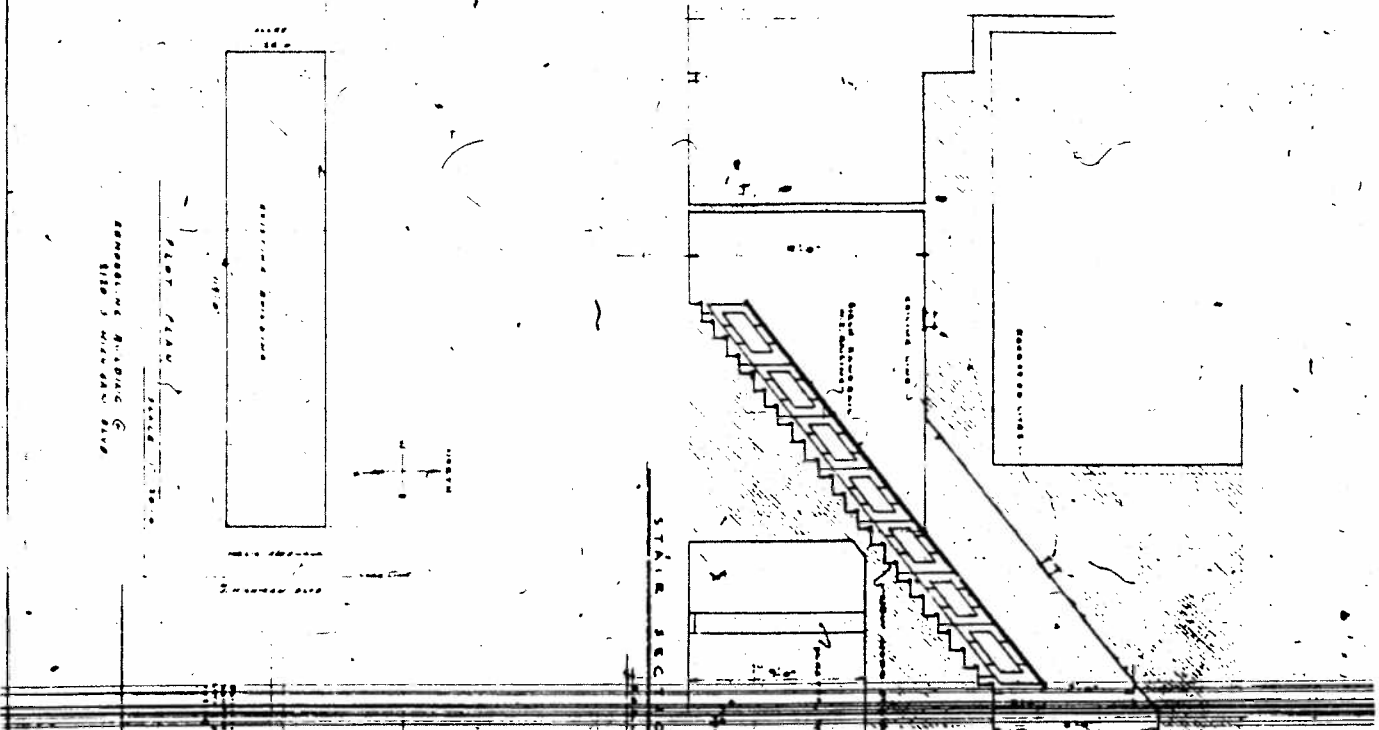


FIRST FLOOR PLAN



*OPPOSITE:*

Details from the original 1957 architect's drawings showing the storefront alterations and the interior display shelves.



Architectural drawing showing floor plan, section, and elevation details for a building. The drawing includes structural lines, annotations, and labels for various components such as 'STAIR SECTION', 'SECTION', 'DISPLAY WALL DETAILS', 'SEMI-ELEVATION PLASSEM', and 'STOCK FRONT'. The text 'CHESS RECORDS' is visible on the wall surfaces in the section drawings. The sign on the stock front reads 'Chess PRODUCING CO. INC.' and '2125'. The drawing is a technical architectural plan.

*OPPOSITE:*

Advertisement from the May 20, 1957 issue of *The Billboard* announcing the Chess Corporation's move to 2120 South Michigan Avenue. The building was also home to Chess' subsidiary labels Checker and Argo.

new leaders

new single hits

new album hits



**\*OUR TWO BIG MONEY LEADERS HIGH UP ON THE NATIONAL CHARTS**

Chess #1653

**"SCHOOL DAY"**

(Ring! Ring! Goes the Bell)

CHUCK BERRY

Checker #863

The Original

**"SUSIE-Q"**

DALE HAWKINS

**\*Our New SINGLE Hits**

Chess #1654

Hitting the Charts

**"OVER THE MOUNTAIN ACROSS THE SEA"**

Johnnie & Joe

Checker #860

**"HEY, BO-DIDDLY"**

Bo-Diddly

Chess #1661

**"PLEASE SEND ME SOMEONE TO LOVE"**

b/w

**"MY ENGINEER"**

The Moonglows

Chess #1658

**"NO MORE"**

b/w

**"YOU CAN SUIT YOURSELF"**

Bobby Charles

Argo #5268

**"THE BAMBOO TREE"**

b/w

**"ISLE OF TRINIDAD"**

The Regents

**\*THE BIG NEW ALBUMS**

Chess #1426

CHUCK BERRY

**"AFTER SCHOOL SESSION"**

(also available on LP JS118)

Argo #608

**"ZOOT"**

Zoot Sims

Argo #610

**"COUNT 'EM 88"**

Ahmad Jamal

Argo #611

**"RAMSEY LEWIS and HIS GENTLEMEN OF SWING"**

NEW LOCATION—NEW ADDRESS—NEW TELEPHONE NUMBER

**CHESS-CHECKER-ARGO**  
RECORD COMPANY

2120 So. Michigan Avenue

Chicago, Illinois

All Phones: CAlumet 5-2770

\* terrific



*Staff for this publication*

Timothy Samuelson, *research and writing*







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